



# Generic speech does women no favours



**Janet Holmes**  
**WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE**

**T**HE BLATANT workplace sexism apparent in the popular television programme *Mad Men* indicates how much progress has been made over the past 40 years.

There are undoubtedly more women in senior positions in organisations than in the 1960s, even in New Zealand, though we are still far from reaching an equal representation of women and men in well-paid and high profile jobs.

At present, women make up about 47 per cent of the New Zealand workforce, but only 7 per cent of the board members of the top 100 New Zealand companies are women. And most lower-status, less well-paid administrative positions in organisations are still filled by women.

There has also been some progress in reducing sexist language in the past 40 years, as indicated by research using large language databases collected at Victoria University.

Despite some resistant cases such as waitress and actress (where frequency contributes to their survival), sex-marked suffixes such as -ess and -ette are steadily disappearing.

These days we rarely talk about a manageress, a poetess, an authoress, a directress, or an usherette. These terms trivialise the work of the women they refer to.

The word man to refer to women as well as men is also much less common than it was in the last century. Rather than "Man still has much to do to resolve the problems generated by global warming", many people prefer alternatives such as we or the human race or humankind.

You still occasionally hear generic man, as grammar books label it, in rhetorical speeches, but it has an old-fashioned ring

which signals its impending demise.

Another such usage was the topic of a query from a Wellington correspondent. She bemoaned the lack of gender-inclusive pronouns, suggesting we invent some. Her suggestions were se (she/he), sim (her/him) and sis (her/his).

There have been many attempts to replace generic he since the 18th century grammarians' proclamations on this subject. An 1850 act of parliament reinforced their prescriptions by specifying that in parliamentary acts, the masculine pronoun he "shall be deemed and taken to include females".

More than 80 gender-inclusive pronouns have been proposed since then, including tey, thon, et, ip, ou, co, per, ne and hiser. Another option for New Zealanders, of course, is the gender-neutral Maori pronoun ia.

However, the solution which has been most widely adopted, both in speech and writing, is generic they.

Research on Labour Department documents, for example, by one of our graduate students, Tim Brown, showed a reduction from 98 per cent use of generic he in the 1960s to 7 per cent in the 1990s, with a complementary rise from 0 to 81 per cent for generic they.

Moreover, generic they has reputable precedents; it was used by Shakespeare, Chesterfield, George Bernard Shaw and Doris Lessing, among others.

**D**EROGATORY and demeaning metaphors still tend to be more frequently heard for women (chick, bitch, dog, old bag) than for men.

Moreover, to insult a man, you can call him an old woman or a girl's blouse.

Metaphors may also contribute to a



view of the workplace as a tough arena, more suited to men than women.

A recent book on workplace language indicated that men tend to use more war and sport metaphors when describing their approach to leadership and management.

One male leader talked, for example, about the tough market in which he worked where price wars were common, with both winners and losers; consequently he had to fight hard for his company and stand his ground when under attack.

These aggressive metaphors are so familiar that we scarcely notice their basis in the language of warfare.

Similarly, sport, and especially rugby, infuse business discourse with phrases such as getting on top of the ball, throwing a real curved ball, kicking for touch and dropping the ball.

These metaphors often work below our radar, subtly constructing a view of the

world which is far from woman-friendly.

Why should we care about such patterns in our everyday language?

My reason for caring is my belief in gender equity. Sexist language is one means by which a culture or society perpetuates sexist attitudes.

If women are rendered invisible by so-called generic he and man which mean 'male' to most people, if they are trivialised or demeaned by pejorative imagery, and if they are subtly defined as inappropriate participants in the business world, then we do not have a gender-level playing field and we are losing the advantages that women add when they are equal players in the workforce.

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**Send your questions about language to [words@dompost.co.nz](mailto:words@dompost.co.nz)**